

A REVOLUTIONARY INTERPRETATION OF PHILOSOPHY

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I

In his book, *Bergson and Education*, Mr. Oliver A. Wheeler bewails the bad fortune of philosophy. "The history of philosophy in the past," he says, "presents a striking contrast to the history of science. Modern science has developed continuously, almost steadily, for the last two centuries. . . . each worker in a particular field has been able to enter equipped with the knowledge accumulated by his predecessors, and by building upon it has often been able to add to it. . . . But in philosophy, instead of continuous progress, there has been perpetual return to foundations; almost every philosopher seems to find it necessary to criticize the foundations of earlier works, to undermine their conclusions, and to begin again at the beginning." I quote Mr. Wheeler, not because there is anything new or remarkable in his opinion, but simply because his book happens to be temptingly near at hand. I could have quoted a dozen or more other writers on philosophy who have expressed the same opinion in nearly the same words. This pessimistic opinion as to the nature of philosophy is very widespread. What is especially remarkable about it is that it is often expressed by enemies of philosophy, usually who are disappointed only with the past history of philosophy, and by no means with its present and future. This is also the case with Mr. Wheeler; he speaks about the history of philosophy until now, but now is different. All the panegyrics usually end with some declaration: "But now, since Mr. So-and-so published his great work, the plight of philosophy is ended. The unsolvable problems of philosophy being solved, from now on every 'newcomer' will not have to 'bother' again about all these problems that have puzzled philosophers from Plato to Mr. So-and-so." The unhappy beginning, it seems, was only to additionally emphasize the happy ending.

These ardent friends of philosophy, orthodox disciples of one or another philosopher, holding philosophy in very high esteem, do not notice that in their enthusiasm for their "great teacher" they are really signing a death sentence for philosophy. It is self-evident that if their teacher has really said the last word, as they piously believe, solved all the riddles that could not be solved until now, then the history of philosophy is ended. There is no more place for it, at least not for any original contributions. The only thing that remains for the future philosopher is to expand the views of his "great teacher", popularize them, apply them—but nothing else. This would really be sad if it were true, or even if we could imagine that at any future time it would become true. Luckily for philosophy, it neither is, nor can it ever be true. The business of discovering "all ultimate truths", of "solving all riddles", of at last "creating such a final philosophy", has been so often repeated, and it has so often failed, that we may rest content that the history of philosophy is not yet at an end, and will not end in the future, not even with Mr. Bergson.

Nevertheless, the problem raised as to the "bad fortune" of philosophy is important in itself. If we do not hope that *some* philosopher will *some time* solve the problems of philosophy, are we not admitting that philosophy is in itself a futile task, a kind of mental gymnastics that leads nowhere? This question also has been asked more than once. It was raised very often by the so-called enemies of philosophy, by pessimists and sceptics as well as by optimists, by metaphysicians as well as by men of science who wanted to "take charge" of their "puzzles" and see what they could make out of them in their laboratories. Their success was negligible. It developed that neither "God" nor "truth" nor "beauty", not even the "human mind", "is a good subject" for scientific laboratory experiments. The best that these scientists could give us were descriptions, often brilliant and valuable, but beyond descriptions they could not go; they could discover (and even then only partly) the *hows*, but never the *whys*. But the "whys" are what philosophy seeks to discover. This caused some scientists to give up all hopes for philosophy, and others to leave science for mysticism. Meanwhile philosophers have gone on with their work, writing books, speculating, trying out new methods and creating new systems, discovering and re-discovering new "eternal" truths, only to discard them later and to put "new" truths in their place, and so *ad infinitum*.

A superficial reading of the history of philosophy really creates the impression that it is nothing but a history of mistakes. What is especially puzzling is that wise and learned men, deep and original thinkers, devote their whole lives to the study of these mistakes and to creating new ones. The problems with which the present-day philosopher toils are really the same that Plato endeavored to solve. We do not know any more about all these "pure metaphysical or transcendental" problems than the ancient Greeks knew. How different it is with science! What is Greek biology, or astronomy, or physics, to us today? Nothing more than a memory of how ignorant man has been, an attestation of our own greatness. But in philosophy, have we transcended Plato? No sir, our methods are different, our problems are different, but not because the earlier problems were solved; we have simply, as Dewey says, "got over them."

The most logical thing for us to do would evidently be to despair. But one can not despair "to order"; there is something in us that compels us to philosophize, to continue the eternal search for philosophic truths, in spite of our reading of the history of philosophy. Instead of despairing, we rather rationalize, deceive ourselves with some new definition, and go on with our work.

This is very well illustrated in the case of the German mystic poet-philosopher Keyserling. The study of philosophy brought him nothing but despair. He fully realizes that since philosophy until now has not been able to discover even one objective apodictic truth, we have no hopes of being more *successful* than our *predecessors*. But philosophize we must, at least Keyserling and his "brothers in spirit" must, so he has written a beautiful essay to show that philosophy is really an art, that it ought not to aspire to objective truths, and we should not look for objective truths in its substance. If you want objective truth, science will furnish you with this article; philosophy is only the way this or that man sees the world, a kind of poetry in hard, often unintelligible, language, about the eternal really insolvable enigmas of life. Every artist interprets life subjectively, and we demand nothing more of him, and the philosopher is nothing more than an artist, philosophy nothing more than a peculiar kind of art.

This sounds very plausible and *consoling*, but it is, after all, a poor consolation. We are hungry for these truths. They are like evil spirits within us, sphinxes that are ineluctable and who never

cease to cry, "Solve us or we shall devour you." What Keyserling says is that we can never really solve them, because, no matter how great our power of self-deception may be, it is not strong enough to make us accept as truths hypotheses which we cannot prove even to ourselves. We ourselves must, at least, believe that what we accept as truth is really truth, and must be truth for every normal being, in other words, is objective truth. Does this mean that nothing but despair remains for us?

No, not by any means.

II

This pessimistic view of philosophy is the result of every popular and fallacious conception of the nature of philosophy. Philosophy, according to this conception, exists for the purpose of discovering eternal, immutable, absolute truths. The philosopher is a special kind of being. He has no other interest than truth. He wants to find truth, irrespective of consequences. He approaches his subject without any bias; he has no ax to grind. In one of his psychological novels the eminent French novelist, Paul Bourget, has given us an artistic picture of this kind of philosopher who has absolutely no relations with the world, who spends all his time in his cabinet among his books, has no friends, no one to visit him, nor does he visit any one. His windows are always shut, so that no sound of real, or as he thinks illusive, life can penetrate into his cabinet; he reads no papers, because they may bias him; all he wants is truth for truth's sake. This is why philosophers have always spoken in terms of absolute truths, because they have believed the fable about themselves.

This fable has now been entirely discredited by the new psychology. There is no such thing as an unbiased man; before the philosopher begins to philosophize, he has lived, and by living has formed certain habits, inclinations, likes and dislikes. Modern psychology believes, and correctly, that the key to one's philosophy is to be found not in one's conscious thoughts, but in his unconscious urges and desires. Truth, at least the kind of truth that cannot be proven experimentally, is nothing but rationalization. It is not an unbiased man that goes out in search of truth. It is really an idealist going out to find a rationalization for his idealism, a materialist going out to find a rationalization for his materialism, and so on. The ingenious guess of Nietzsche, that

the philosopher acquires his convictions first and their justifications afterward, has been proven to be a scientific truth. If you want to find the real key to Kant's philosophy, study his biography, find out all the influences of his early life, his education, his joys and sorrows—not only when he wrote his immortal works, but also before he ever thought of them. In his seemingly so abstract works you will find the traces of everything that he experienced in his life, even though he has long ago forgotten them himself. This is at present accepted by all, whether we agree with the larger aspects of the new psychology or not, whether one is a behaviorist or a functionalist, a devotee of psycho-analysis or psycho-physics. This principle of subjectivism is now accepted by all. You cannot know a philosophy without knowing the philosopher. The person and his opinions are inseparable. This view has, of course, dealt a powerful blow to the earlier conception of objective philosophy. If Kant's philosophy is nothing but a rationalization of his unconscious urges and desires, his subjective likes and dislikes, it can be looked upon only as a human document, that reveals nothing more than the reflections of an interesting man. The views of Keyserling and many other philosophers in present-day Germany and Russia, that philosophy is not and can never be any more than a special kind of art, are the results of the application of the principles of the new psychology to philosophy.

In his book, *The Mind in the Making*, Professor J. M. Robinson says:

Philosophers, scholars, and men of science exhibit a common sensitiveness in all decisions in which their *amour propre* is involved . . . a history of philosophy and theology could be written in terms of grouches, wounded pride, and aversion, and it would be far more instructive than the usual treatment of these themes. . . . Milton wrote his treatises on divorce as a result of his troubles with his wife . . . (p. 45.)

And so we could find such purely personal motives in all other philosophies, though they are unconscious. But can we find in this view a consolation? Does it help us in any way to better understand the history of philosophy? By no means.

According to this view, philosophy is a purely personal matter. Plato's philosophy was conditioned by his known and unknown biography, and Kant's transcendental idealism "reflects only the unconscious urges and cravings of the man Kant." Instead of a

history of mistakes, we have a history of pure subjective opinions, material for psychologists in their investigations of the "unfathomed human soul", of the interplay of human instincts and unconscious urges.

III

We frequently speak of the "spirit of the age"; we say that philosophy in the eighteenth century was materialistic and social in its character; in the first half of the nineteenth century it was idealistic and romantic; in the second half, natural science overshadowed all other thought, just as today psychology has the upper hand. If we accept the view that philosophy, the "science of sciences", is a purely personal thing, how does it happen that at a certain time all philosophers are materialists or idealists, or at another, are concerned chiefly with social problems. It is evident that, according to the subjective view, there can be no such thing as a "spirit of the age"; nevertheless it is a fact that cannot be denied. There certainly must be some flaw in this view, something that is unquestionably erroneous.

In his book, *Das Ich*, Professor S. Freud apologizes for writing on social psychology in the following words: "Every individual psychology is and must be also a social psychology", because, explains Freud, the individual cannot be separated from the other individuals with whom he lives and who influence not only his conscious thought and acts but also his unconscious urges. This view of the influence of the social environment of the individual is, of course, not new; Tarde, and after him J. Mark Baldwin, have based their entire social and psychologic systems on the theory of imitation; Sidis, in his theory of suggestion, long ago maintained that we are mostly what we are "suggested by our environment to be." Trotter, and Walter Lippman, Wallace and others, based their political and sociological theories entirely on the unconscious influence of society on the individual, but none of them has tried to apply this "sociological view" to the history of philosophy. It is evident that if the individual is what he is through the influence of his social environment, the philosopher is no exception, and philosophy must be considered as a form of social ideology.

Of all contemporary philosophers only one seems to understand it. This one is John Dewey. Philosophy, according to Dewey, must

be viewed as a product of social environment; "experience," he says, "is a matter of function and habits, of active adjustment and readjustment, of co-ordination of activities rather than of states of consciousness." (*Darwin and His Influence on Philosophy*, p. 157). "The genetic standpoint makes us aware," Dewey continues in another place, "that the systems of the past are neither fraudulent impostures nor absolute revelations; but are the products of political, economic and scientific conditions, whose change carries with it the change of theoretical formulations." (*Ibid*, p. 68.) In other words, philosophy is a product of social life; philosophic opinions are conditioned by political and economic conditions, the history of philosophy reflects the history of political environment. Speaking of Greek philosophy, Dewey shows that not only the political and economic theories of ancient Greece, but also its philosophy, reflect and are absolutely determined by Greek social conditions . . . "Philosophy did not develop from an unbiased origin. It had a mission to perform. It became the work of philosophy to justify on rational grounds the spirit, though not the form, of accepted beliefs and traditional customs" (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 18). Dewey goes further, as we see, than merely recognizing philosophy as a product of social life; he has also discovered the apologetic character of philosophy. The Greek philosophers justified Greek customs: "This apologetic spirit of philosophy is even more apparent when mediæval Christianity, about the twelfth century, sought for a systematic rational presentation of itself and made use of classic philosophy, especially that of Aristotle . . . A not dissimilar occurrence characterizes the chief philosophic systems of Germany in the early nineteenth century, when Hegel assumed the task of justifying in the name of rational idealism the doctrines and institutions which were menaced by the new spirit of science and popular government (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 19). Considered in this way, we have in philosophy, instead of the disputes of rivals about the nature of reality, "the scene of human clash of social purpose and aspirations." Philosophy, according to Dewey, is nothing more than an instrument in the hands of man, to be used for the justification of the *status quo*. In a later book, *Human Nature and Conduct*, he goes even further, and recognizes that there are always various groups in society who have different interests, and philosophy is used by the different groups to rationalize their struggles for

their group interests. At times it seems that Dewey is on the verge of rediscovering the class-struggle. But this last step he has not as yet made.

IV

A certain author, in reviewing Dewey's book, *Human Nature and Conduct* entitled his review *Dewey Meets Marx*. I should add to it the words "half way". It is true that Dewey's view on philosophy is essentially Marxian. In his thesis on Feuerbach Marx says: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, but the point is to change it." Anyone who knows Marx understands that Marx did not intend to tell the philosophers what they should do; what he said, as also has Dewey, was that philosophy has, after all, a practical task to perform. "The chief lack of all materialistic philosophy up to the present," wrote Marx, "is that the thing, the reality-sensation, is only conceived under the form of the object which is presented to the eye, but not as human sense, activity, praxis and further . . . in practice man must prove the truth. . . . The materialistic doctrine that men are the product of conditions and education . . . forgets that circumstances may be altered by men."

"The life of society is essentially practical . . . All the mysteries which seduce speculative thought into mysticism find their solution in human practice and in concepts of this practice."

What Marx says here is simply the same as Dewey, that all philosophic concepts are products of social practice, but while Dewey contents himself with this assertion, Marx goes still further. Philosophy is a social product, good and well, but philosophy has a history, it develops, it changes; what determines its history? The changes in political and social life cause changes in philosophic opinions, says Dewey; that is true, agrees Marx, but it does not explain the fundamental causes. Philosophy is part of social life, the history of philosophy is part of the history of society, but you cannot finally explain the history of philosophy by reference to social life, because social life, of which philosophy is a part, is in itself to be explained. What we need is a general interpretation of social life; we must find the laws according to which society develops; this will necessarily furnish us also with an interpretation of all the constituent parts of society. Dewey does not take up this problem in its larger aspects,

and that is where he falls short of Marx. Marx has not, as has Dewey, evaded this much more difficult problem, but with his characteristic thoroughness he tackled and solved it. This is why Marxism has been able to become a prolegomenon to every future study of philosophy and the social sciences. "It is not man's consciousness that determines his social relations, but his social relations that determine his consciousness," stated Marx. But what determines the social relations? "The development of man's productive powers," answered Marx—in the development of the means by which man can satisfy his wants. In order to live man must produce. Man must have food, shelter and clothing before he can have philosophy or poetry. It is in the process of production that the human intellect develops. In man's struggle to subdue nature, to make nature serve his end, human knowledge begins. This is very well understood by Dewey. He says:

The requirements of continued existence make indispensable some attention to the actual facts of the world . . . That certain things are foods, that they are to be found in certain places, that water drowns, fire burns, that sharp points penetrate and cut, that heavy things fall unless supported, that there is a certain regularity of the day and night and the alternation of hot and cold, wet and dry—such prosaic facts force themselves upon even primitive attention. (Reconstruction In Philosophy, p. 10.)

This is, according to Dewey, the beginning of our natural science; "this knowledge is especially connected with industries, arts and crafts where observations of material and process is required for successful action." (Ibid.) With this every Marxist will agree. But Dewey does not even think that in the same process of production can be found not only the source of all knowledge, but also the laws of social evolution. Man is a tool-making and a tool-using animal. He must produce his means of life with whatever means of production he has at hand. These means of production determine the form of his social life.

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will—relations of production. The totality of these industrial relations constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which the legal and political superstructure is built, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. . . . With the change of the economic basis the whole vast superstructure undergoes, sooner or later, a revolution.

In other words, the way in which men produce their means of life not only determines the forms of society, but also its ideology, its art, science, philosophy, etc.

According to this view, philosophy is only the generalization of the ideology of society at a certain period, the rationalization of the urges, desires and aspirations not of any one individual, but of society. In reference to the various forms of social ideology, Marx declared (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 48.)

The whole class produces and shapes these out of its material foundation, and out of the corresponding social conditions. The individual unit to whom they flow, through tradition and education, may fancy that they constitute the true reasons for and premises of his conduct.

Social consciousness is the product of social life; philosophy is the rationalization of this consciousness. But society is not one homogenous thing; society is divided into classes that fight each other, in classes that have different interests,* that live in different economic environments, occupy different positions in the productive life of society, and develop, consequently, different kinds of social consciousness, different social ideas and aspirations, and have therefore different philosophies. We are, therefore, justified in speaking of bourgeois philosophy and of proletarian philosophy as various rationalizations of the interests and aspirations of these classes.

Although when we take this view of philosophy we must, it is true, give up the idea that philosophy will ever discover absolute, eternal laws and ultimate causes, we are able also to give up the pessimistic view of the history of mistakes, but a history of class-truths. Philosophic truths have been abandoned not because of their falsity, but because the new economic conditions have demanded new rationalizations.

*Even Guizot, as V. F. Calverton mentioned in a footnote to "Morals and Determinism," saw that "in order to understand political institutions, it is necessary to study the different castes that exist within a given society, and their mutual relations. To understand these different social castes we must know the nature of their property (land) relations."